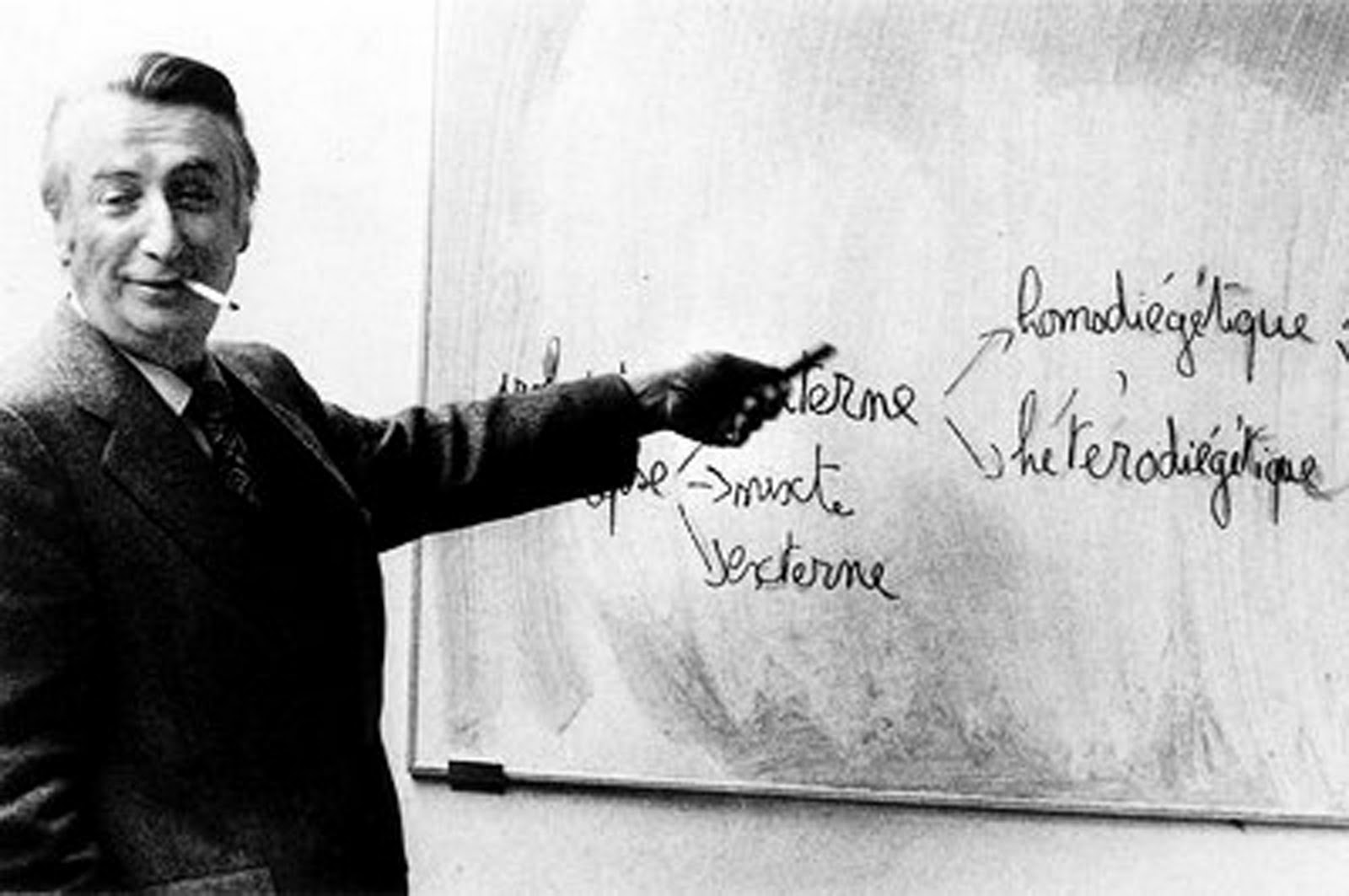
**Self-Reflexivity and Intertextuality in Contemporary Art: An Introductory Text Set**

Students in the 21st Century live in a unique and undefined artistic (Modern? Post-Modern? Post-Post-Modern?) era, dominated by art that frequently employs two key interconnected tropes: **Intertextuality**, the conscious linking of a text with many others, to encourage comparison and generate new meaning; and **Self-Reflexivity**, the conscious presentation of a work of art *as* a work of art, with reference to its own creation. These can be seen in a number of ways: homage, parody and the breaking of the “fourth wall” are frequently employed, for example, in the popular cartoons *The Simpsons*, *Spongebob Squarepants*, and *Family Guy*; the much-lauded “user generated content” of Web 2.0 is infinitely self (and other) referential; and in film, we live in the era of the remake, the sequel, and the adaptation. Yet, despite the prevalence of self-reflexivity and intertextuality in contemporary culture, these complex literary concepts are frequently left unexamined in high school English classrooms.

The ten texts that comprise this set hope to produce critical and conscious readers by providing students with an introduction to the history and study of Self-Reflexivity and Intertextuality in art. The texts are intentionally eclectic, and have been chosen to offer a variety of voices, styles, and approaches, including political, aesthetic, and metaphysical discussions of the two central concepts.[[1]](#footnote-1) By studying these texts, students will examine the relationships between Intertextuality and Self-Reflexivity, and how they are used to both generate and complicate meaning within the artistic milieu of the 21st Century.

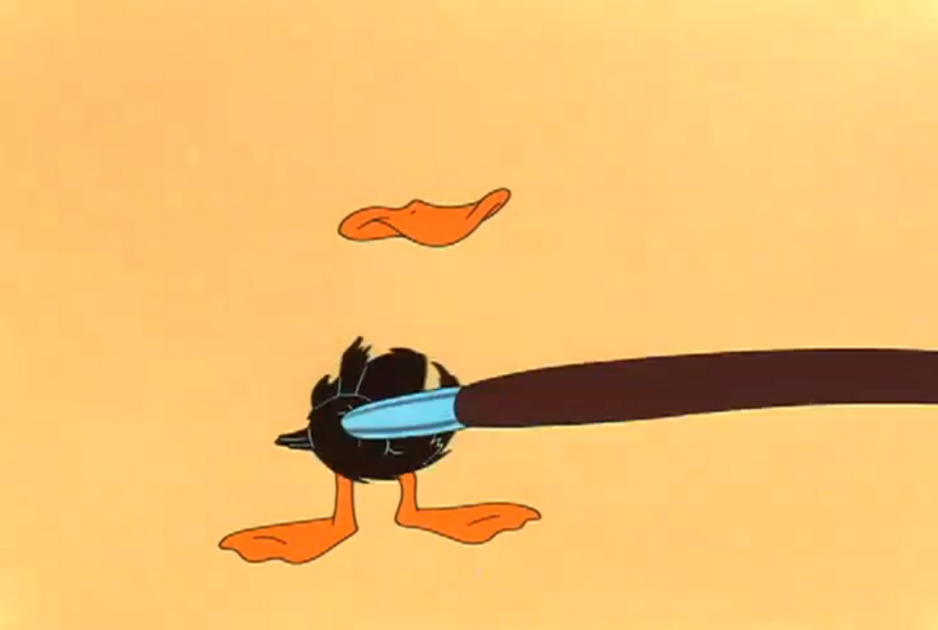
**1. “The Death of the Author” & “From Work to Text” – Roland Barthes (Essays)**

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Roland Barthes’ two most famous essays both operate to trouble traditional understandings of, and approaches towards, literature. “The Death of the Author” is written with the revolutionary passion and vigour of its specific moment of production (Paris, in the late 1960s), and seeks to overturn the traditional view of narrative as driven by an “Author-God” and instead place the reader as the arbiter of meaning. By comparison, “From Work to Text,” written later in a much more playful and inviting tone, sets about defining how the reader holds power over the text, and how that power is used to generate meaning.

The inclusion of these two essays is intended as a sort of “laying the ground work” for the specific critical approaches that this text set is intended to address. Barthes’ work, perhaps more than anything else, is useful because it is provocative. By declaring that the Author is dead, for example, Barthes forces some kind of reaction, and opens himself up instantly for contention. The key goals behind the inclusion of these two essays is to first, encourage students to think critically about the practice of reading (and their own active participation within it), and second, to begin conversations on the ideas of Self-Reflexivity and Intertextuality. If the Author is dead, for example, how can a text alone be self-reflexive? How can we read Barthes’ conception of literature as a “tissue of quotations” (from “From Work to Text”)? If no choice of words is ever fully original, but rather it draws from the whole history of human cultural production, (that is, all text draws meaning from all other text, and as such all texts must be read as intertextual, and infinitely referential) then can there be such a thing as “originality” in literature?

**2. “Duck Amuck” – Chuck Jones, et. al. (Cartoon)**

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This “Looney Tunes” classic shows Daffy Duck being subjected to the whims of a seemingly sadistic animator. Daffy begins what appears to be a fairly straightforward parody of *The Three Musketeers*, only to walk off the edge of the screen and find himself on blank white page. When Daffy turns and addresses his animator, demanding scenery, he sets off a progression of increasingly frustrating tricks, perpetrated by the animator. Finally, after Daffy has been erased, re-coloured, silenced, blown up and otherwise thoroughly embarrassed and mistreated, the camera pulls back to reveal that the animator of this cartoon was Bugs Bunny.

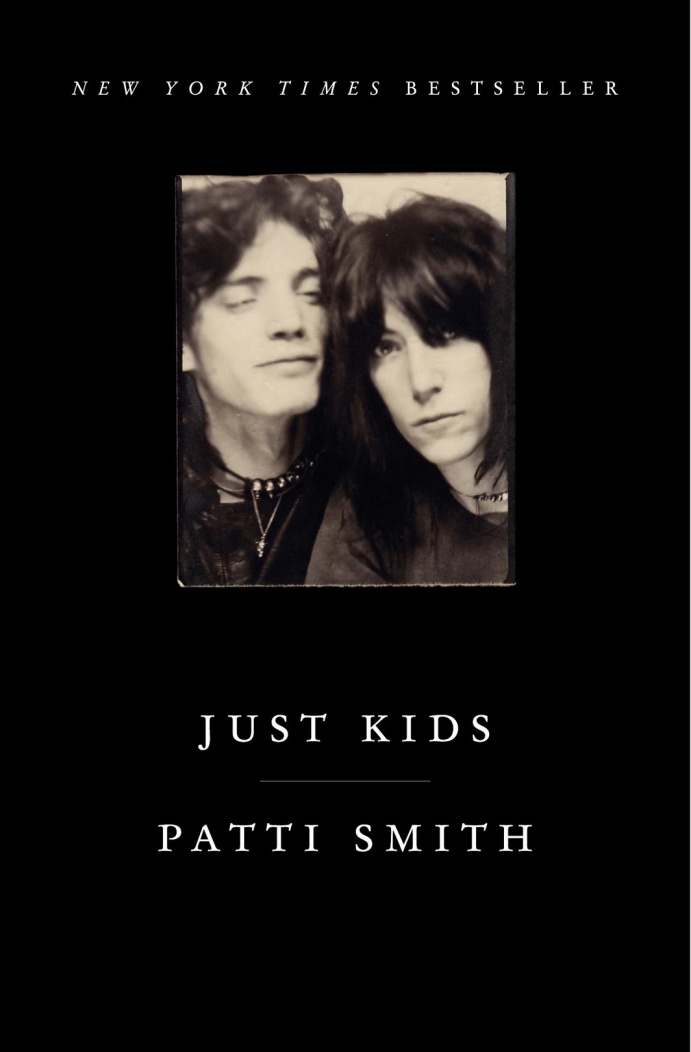
This beloved short is included because it is one of the earliest and most direct examples of what is now a fairly common practice in cartooning: a conscious shattering of the “fourth wall,” wherein a fictional character breaks from his/her role as a character in a work of art, and instead foregrounds the fictitious and constructed nature of the artistic piece. Daffy steps directly out of character, to address not only the animator but also the audience. This piece is fascinating, in that it directly reflect Barthes’ conception of an “Author-God” in the form of a malevolent animator, yet only does so through an animated construction of the act of animating. It consciously dramatizes its own production to reflect on the standards and norms of cartooning (setting, sound, colour, the suspension of disbelief, etc.). It is thus both self-referential, in that is foregrounds itself as work of art, yet also intertextually referential in that it offers a commentary on cartoons and cartooning generally.

**3. “At the Quinte Hotel” – Al Purdy (Poem)**

In Al Purdy’s classic poem, about a bar in small town Ontario, the speaker, a self-described “sensitive man,” attempts to illustrate his dismal setting using laughably “poetic” language; he describes draft beer, for example, as “half fart and half horse piss and all wonderful yellow flowers.” After observing a fight break out in the bar, Purdy’s speaker injects himself into the fracas. Only after beating the other man up does the speaker chastise “violence will get you nowhere,” and he uses his pugilistic victory as a way to gain the attention of the other patrons in the bar. Having gained the floor, the poet then reads the poem (the very poem that the reader is reading and the speaker is composing, which includes the description of reading the poem), in the hopes that the other patrons will be so moved by its beauty that they will buy him another round of beer.

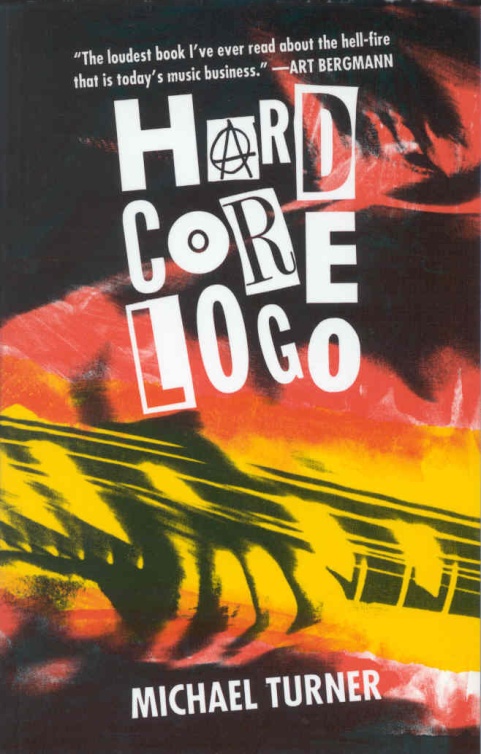
The inclusion of “At the Quinte Hotel” is based on its unique position as a collision between “high” and “low” culture, both a classic poem and a parody of poetry itself. Purdy’s poet/speaker is both laughable and tragic, tiptoeing the line between barroom braggart and “sensitive” poet. The conflation of Purdy the poet and Purdy’s poet speaker, highlighted in the surreal move when the speaker reads the poem that he is the speaker of, is a deft self-reflexive move which troubles easy categorizations of this work: when the speaker is thwarted at the end, discovering that “poems will not really buy beer or flowers,” how should this be interpreted? Is this Purdy offering a condemnation of the patrons of the Quinte Hotel for not appreciating the beauty of his art, or Purdy condemning poetry for being incapable of speaking to an audience of the “common man?”

(One possible extension of the reading of this poem would be to show the two very different short films that have been made of it. The first (2002), directed by Douglas Bensadoun and starring Gord Downie of the Tragically Hip, presents the poem in the form of a narrative, focussing on the self-reflexive poet. The second (2005), directed by Bruce Alcock, animates a recording of Purdy reading his poem, using colours and objects to suggest a visual reading of the poetic imagery used throughout the poem.)

**4. *Just Kids* – Patti Smith (Memoir)**

*Just Kids* is Patti Smith’s intimate memoir of her life and work with Robert Mapplethorpe, describing their relationship from their first meeting in the mid 1960s until Mapplethorpe’s death in 1989. This memoir also tracks the development of the two into major artistic forces of the 20th Century, Smith as a writer and singer and Mapplethorpe as a visual artist and photographer. As such, it is a highly personal snapshot of the New York City art scene in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, and an account of two artists’ lives and creative processes in turbulent times.

Smith’s book is both tragic and beautiful in that it narrates love and self-destruction, and how they both contribute equally to the artistic process. Itself a work of art, this book also offers a unique representation of the themes of this set because it reflects backwards on artistic creation. By the inclusion of specific pieces of art, Smith is able to narrate the continuous links, backwards and forwards, between art objects and their creation. So, for example, some of Mapplethorpe’s photos are included in the book, as well as Smith’s writings which were directly inspired by the photos. Thus, Smith’s memoir offers a reflection on her pieces of writing (which are reflections of Mapplethorpe’s visual art) while also reflecting on how both the writing and the visual art were created. The novel is, thus, a constant self-referential intertext, which continuously revisits the same ideas, images, and moments from a variety of critical, personal, historical, and creative lenses, to constantly generate different meanings and interpretations.

**5. *Hard Core Logo* – Michael Turner (Novel)**

A contemporary novel that uses the antiquated epistolary style, *Hard Core Logo* tracks the comeback tour of a fictional 1970s Canadian punk rock band. The narrative of this novel is constructed from discarded artifacts of the band Hard Core Logo’s disastrous attempt at reconciliation, including set lists, answering machine messages, and receipts. Through these disparate items, the egos, rivalries, and personalities that contributed to the group’s dissolution are illustrated, and the stage is set for a stunning collapse.

This novel is a fascinating inclusion to this set because of its utter artificiality, which is created through its fictionalization of real (and mundane) objects; it is a construction which misrepresents itself as factual (so much so that this book is frequently sold in the non-fiction section of book stores). It is a fictionalized cultural study, and a novel about music which is completely silent. Each of the disparate pieces that form the narrative only acquires meaning through its connection with the other pieces within the narrative. It is, as such, a self-contained intertext, which manufactures meaning and creates its own mythology.

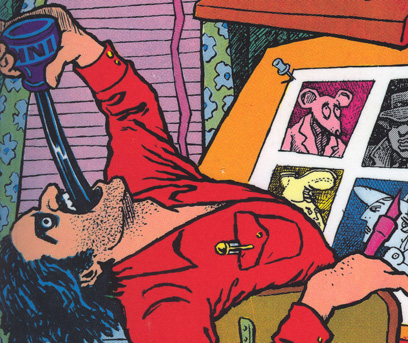
(One possible extension of the discussion of this novel would be to contrast the two adaptations that have been made of it. The first, and more famous, adaptation was Bruce McDonald’s film *Hard Core Logo*, which reinterprets the epistolary novel into a “mockumentary” film, once again creating a seemingly non-fiction narrative out of fictional artifacts. The second, Nick Craine’s graphic novel *Portrait of a Thousand Punks: Hard Core Logo* reproduces the narrative of the novel, but does so without a critical/intertextual lens.)

**6. “At Joan’s” & “Why I am Not a Painter” – Frank O’Hara (Poems)**

A curator at the Museum of Modern Art, Frank O’Hara demonstrated the influence of visual art throughout his poetry in his use of a robust and image-based descriptive style and targeted references to works of art and the “art world.” These two poems both include O’Hara writing directly about the similarities and differences between his work as a writer and his work with visual arts. “At Joan’s” describes O’Hara working through his “writer’s block” by examining paintings. “Why I am Not a Painter” offers a comparison between O’Hara’s creative process and that of his friend, the painter Mike Goldberg.

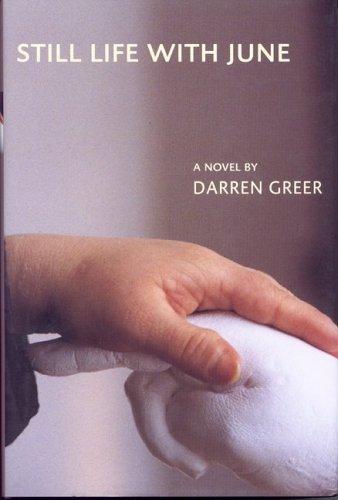
These two poems are included because they succinctly connect both an intertextual comparison between poetry and painting and a self-reflexive meditation on the writing process. “At Joan’s” vacillates between an apparent dread over the speaker’s inability to write and a final sarcastic jab, “what shall I do,” as the poet completes the verses which had previously been elusive; the poem makes a tonal shift, which dramatizes the act of writing them poem (from struggle to success). “Why I am Not a Painter” offers an extended comparison between Goldberg’s painting, “Sardines,” and O’Hara’s writing; Goldberg began with the concept of “sardines” as his guiding image, but his final piece is an abstract combination of colours and shapes. O’Hara began writing a piece by focussing on the colour orange, only to create a series of poems without any reference to the colour orange. The processes that both artists follow seem to mirror one another, yet they work in very different mediums. Ultimately, O’Hara seems to suggest that both poetry and visual arts function by constructing seemingly mundane ideas or thoughts into expressions of deeper beauty. These poems, thus, serve to reflect a specific type of intertextuality (poetry compared to painting) and the process of writing, while also offering an interesting counterbalance to the self-consciously mundane poetic descriptions that students will have already studied in Al Purdy’s “At the Quinte Hotel.”

**7. “Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@#\*!” – Art Spiegelman (Comic/Memoir)**

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A snapshot of one of the 20th Century’s most significant producers of graphic fiction, Art Spiegelman’s “Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@#\*!” is a short autobiographical comic strip showing events of the artist’s childhood. Through four short vignettes, Spiegelman first demonstrates his “love-hate” relationship with comic books, citing them as both a cause and a cure for his social awkwardness as a child, before reflecting on how his childhood hobby has become his adult career and obsession.

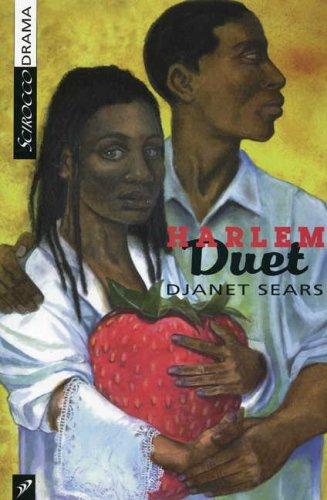
This short cartoon autobiography is only one in the series of self-reflexive comic memoirs that Art Spiegelman has created throughout his career (his most famous remains the celebrated graphic novel *Maus*). Through reading this text, students will explore how the construction of autobiography through the use of the comic format has a paradoxical effect on the narrative; while cartoons are, by their very nature, unrealistic caricatures of humanity, Spiegelman’s creation of a cartoon version of himself adds greater emotional depth to the story. Cartoons, by being non-specific can be seen as more universal than realistic images. Spiegelman also draws intertextual references to add meaning to his story. So, for example, when the young Spiegelman sees himself as Charlie Brown, there is a greater potential for empathy with the reader, through a shared familiarity with Charles Schulz’s character.

**8. *Still Life with June* – Darren Greer (Novel)**

In this novel, Cameron Dodds, a struggling writer who works at a Salvation Army Treatment Centre, develops an unhealthy obsession with one of his former patients, Darrel Greene, who recently committed suicide. Fueled by his interest in Greene, and sensing the opportunity to find inspiration for his writing, Cameron begins to research Darrel’s past. Cameron goes as far as lying about his identity in order to begin visiting Darrel’s estranged sister, June, an institutionalized woman with Down Syndrome. This novel tracks the growing relationship between Cameron and June, and how it comes to be reflected in both Cameron’s writing and his conceptions of himself.

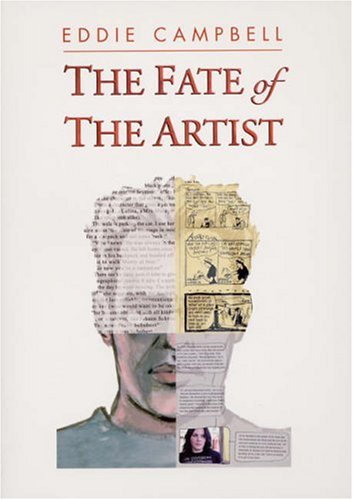
This novel is included in this set because it is an intentionally provocative treatise on the ethics of writing. Is Cameron, the writer, liar, and thief meant to be read as a sympathetic character? Moreover how should the reader respond when it is revealed that Cameron Dodds *is* Darrel Greene (a name choice which is eerily similar to that of the author, Darren Greer, who also once worked at an addiction treatment centre)? Does this revelation render the narrator/author more or less trustworthy? Ultimately, this novel focuses on identity and how lies, relationships, sexuality, abuse, and addiction all effect and construct identities. Yet it explores identity through being a self-referential novel about a novelist trying to write, and as such foregrounds how the act of writing can be yet another (fraudulent?) assumption of an identity. When Cameron prefaces his own story by referring to all writers as liars, how can the reader interpret what follows?

**9. *Harlem Duet* – Djanet Sears (Play)**

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*Harlem Duet* is a revisionist prequel to Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Set in Harlem (in 1860, 1928, and the present day) this play tells the story of Othello’s first wife, Billie, and her emotional collapse following the dissolution of her marriage. Othello, re-imagined as a professor of English literature, has left Billie for a white colleague named Mona, and an increasingly unstable Billie hatches a plot for revenge. Sears’ play explores ideas of race, history, power, and desire to offer a counter-narrative to Shakespeare’s original.

*Harlem Duet* is fascinatingly international; a Canadian play by an Anglo-African playwright set in Harlem and focussed on one of Shakespeare’s plays. This text is included in this set as it demonstrates a different kind of self-reflexive writing than the other texts; it is a consciously political example of “writing back” to a Western, Eurocentric literary tradition (it is not insignificant that Othello is a professor of English literature). That is, the play is a response to a dominant canon; its writing is itself a political act because it has been consciously created to offer a challenge to Shakespeare and the intellectual system that he is representative of. Sears’ play is structured by its intertextual relationship with Shakespeare’s *Othello*, yet it also integrates a variety of African American texts (including speeches from Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King), alongside jazz music (as both soundtrack and running theme), and makes specific reference to the history of slavery and racism in North America to challenge, subvert, and expand the meanings of Shakespeare’s original.

**10. *The Fate of the Artist* – Eddie Campbell (Graphic Novel)**

Subtitled “His Domestic Apocalypse: An Autobiographical Novel, with Typographical Anomalies, in Which the Author Does Not Appear as Himself,” *The Fate of the Artist* is at once a mystery novel, an autobiography, a series of comic shorts, an interview with Campbell’s daughter, an adaptation of the O. Henry short story “Confessions of a Humourist,” and a metaphysical narrative starring God (who appears in the form of a stick figure, drawn in crayon by a child). Both hilarious and sad, this intentionally convoluted graphic novel describes the life and foibles of an eccentric artist, Eddie Campbell, who has recently disappeared while at work on a graphic novel called *The Fate of the Artist*.

The most theoretically complex and intellectually challenging of the texts in this set, *The Fate of the Artist* is also a brilliant closing point, as it connects to the other texts included throughout. Consciously or unconsciously, this novel reads as a response to Roland Barthes’ “Death of the Author;” like Barthes’ “Author-God,” Campbell, the artist/author has inexplicably disappeared, leaving behind his work of art, and placing the burden of interpretation onto the reader. That interpretation is necessarily complex, requiring that the reader draw intertextual connections between the variety of styles and narratives that are explored throughout the novel. This novel is a constant “tissue of quotations,” drawing from dozens of sources (some real, some fictional), open to countless interpretations, all made to encourage readers to form their own opinions about the narrative, the author, and the practice of artistic creation.

**Some Suggestions for Substitution/Further Reading**

**Non-Fiction:**

* *Simulacra and Simulation* – Jean Baudrillard
* *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* – Jean-François Lyotard
* *Literature and Existentialism* – Jean-Paul Sartre
* *Hell’s Angels* – Hunter S. Thompson

**Fiction:**

* *Lolita* – Vladimir Nabokov
* *The Things They Carried­* – Tim O’Brien
* *Tell-All* – Chuck Palahniuk
* *It’s a Good Life if You Don’t Weaken* – Seth

**Drama:**

* *Pagliacci* – Ruggero Leoncavallo
* *Six Characters in Search of an Author* – Luigi Pirandello
* *Hamlet* – William Shakespeare
* *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* – Tom Stoppard

**Media:**

* *Exit Through the Gift Shop* – Banksy, Dir. (Film)
* *Braid* – Jonathan Blow (Video Game)
* *Blazing Saddles* – Mel Brooks, Dir. (Film)
* *Wayne’s World* – Penelope Spheeris, Dir. (Film)

1. Refer to page 12 for a list of other texts that were considered for this set. Please note that many of the texts that did not “make the cut” are more “traditional,” canonical Western texts. For this anthology, I made the decision to choose texts that would reflect both stylistic diversity and, wherever possible, Canadian content. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)